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THE ROLE OF THE MONITOR IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY.

BY- PROBYN, H.E.

AUDIO-VISUAL LANGUAGE ASSN., LONDON (ENGLAND)

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THE COMPLEMENTARY FUNCTIONS OF TEACHER AND LANGUAGE LABORATORY ARE OUTLINED, AND THE TEACHER'S ROLE AS MONITOR (LISTENING IN ON STUDENTS' WORK) IS DEFINED. INTERFERING, SPOTCHECKING, AND HAPHAZARD MONITORING ARE CAUTIONED AGAINST. IDEAL LAB GROUP SIZE SHOULD BE BETWEEN SIX AND 10 STUDENTS, TO ENABLE THE TEACHER TO KNOW DURING THE SESSION HOW HIS STUDENTS ARE PROGRESSING. THE IDEAL CONSOLE FOR EFFECTIVE AND PLANNED MONITORING SHOULD INCLUDE THREE PILOT LIGHTS AND A COUNTER FOR EACH BOOTH, AND PILOTS SHOULD CORRESPOND WITH "RECORD," "PLAY," AND "REWIND" POSITIONS. A COUNTING DEVICE WOULD SHOW WHAT POINT THE STUDENT HAD REACHED IN HIS WORK, THUS PROVIDING VISUAL AS WELL AS AUDIAL MONITORING. FINALLY, STUDENT AND TEACHER SHOULD BE IN VISUAL CONTACT IN THE LABORATORY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "AUDIO-VISUAL LANGUAGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3, SPRING 1966, PAGES 137-141. (AF)

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Editorial:
H. Friedmann, Department of Modern Languages, Holborn College of Law, Languages and Commerce, Red Lion Square, London, W.C.1.

Advertising:
B. Abbs, School of Liberal Arts, Ealing Technical College, St. Mary's Road, London, W.5.

Subscriptions:
Miss A. Gray, 25 Kensington Park Gardens, London, W.11.

AUDIO-VISUAL LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

Membership:
Miss A. Gray, 25 Kensington Park Gardens, London, W.11.

Subscriptions:
Dr. D. Van Abbé, 51 Derwent Close, Cambridge.

Conferences:
J. Gordon, 53 Kensington Gardens, Cranbrook, Ilford, Essex.

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The Role of the Monitor in the Language Laboratory

by H. E. Probyn

In the age of language laboratories, the term "teacher" has apparently come to mean less than it once did. The reason for this is that whatever view you take of the hub of the new language teaching set-ups, it must be admitted that much of the teaching done in them is of the "auto" variety, carried out by the student himself. A popular (though not unanimous) concept of the length of time that the student should spend in the lab. is 50% of the total lesson period, so that the length of time the teacher can be said to "teach" in the previously accepted sense of the word is now only half what it once was. Does this mean, then, that the teacher's job has been reduced by half? It could, and more besides, since, in addition, what the teacher actually does in the classroom nowadays may little resemble the sort of things he once did. Clever use of "oral method" to introduce a new tense or the comparative and superlative forms may now be the task of the machinery in the lab., or is at best, to take the jaundiced view expressed by some, still rigidly controlled by the material of the course used, so that the teacher becomes no more than a stooge to the equipment, making up for its short-comings in respect of the less well-adjusted students who still do not quite grasp the point of the lesson, or persuading reluctant debutants to talk into the mike, when they show the sort of superior resistance recently demonstrated by a student learning French, who sat silently in her booth, and when challenged announced that she wanted to learn "the proper way" and not waste her time "talking to silly machines".

Changing Role of Teacher

But is this extremely conservative view really a sound one? Has the teacher's role really diminished with the advent of machinery? Clearly, as with teaching-machines in general, there is still the programming to do, and regular revision of programmes in the light of fresh discoveries would seem to be necessary. Certainly these two tasks — in the light of the voracious appetite of the language lab. for new material to consume — could be literally never-ending. However, since not every lecturer in universities rewrites his notes every year or two, nor does every school-teacher revise his lesson-material for every new use of it, so then presumably a teacher using a language lab. could eventually find himself supplied with enough material of (in his view) sufficiently good quality to last him till his pension. In such a case, the teacher's task would undeniably be very undemanding, (presumably it would be proportionately unrewarding), though of course a similar conclusion could be reached in respect of the teacher of any subject by any method who had the same attitude to his work.

In fact a little experience quickly shows how far from the truth the idea that the machinery has taken over from the teacher really is. Unfortunately in many cases an inadequate grasp of the sounder view — that of the complementary functions of the teacher and the lab. — has led to the relegation of the lab. to a passive role not unlike that of the reading-room of a library.

What in fact can and should a teacher do when he takes his class into the lab? A satisfactory answer to this question might settle the controversy over whether the role of the teacher has actually diminished or not with the advent of the language laboratory, and provide some food for thought for many who wonder whether the teacher can actually do anything worthwhile during a lab. session.

Most language laboratories incorporate some system which permits the teacher to listen to what the students in the booths are saying, without the students being aware that they are being overheard, and this practice of well-intentioned eavesdropping is generally referred

to as "monitoring". The precise role of a monitor in a language laboratory however has seldom, if ever, been defined, so that to the novice — i.e. anyone with fewer than five years' experience of language laboratory work to his or her credit — who gives serious thought to the task, many questions pose themselves, to many of which adequate answers have not been — and possibly cannot be — given.

Relationship between Classroom and Laboratory

Before discussion of these questions, however, a more basic one must be asked, and answered, for upon the answer the validity of many of the questions about the role of the monitor depends. This fundamental question is: what is the relationship of activities carried out in the laboratory to those carried out in the classroom?

There seem to be two dominating schools of thought on the subject of the role of the laboratory. Some people think it should be no more than a place for supervised, mechanised private study. Others regard the laboratory as an extension of the classroom, where activities are carried out which are part and parcel of the teaching and learning process, in no way divorced from, and in every way related to classroom work. Of all the dilemmas this diversity of approach creates, one emerges above all others, and that is the matter of the retention or otherwise of the teacher-student relationship which is inevitably built up if classroom work is carried out.

Purpose of the Language Laboratory

Though not strictly the main topic under discussion in this article, the question of the role of the language laboratory must be settled, both in the world at large for everyone's peace of mind, and within the confines of these pages, so that the particular question of the role of the monitor can be discussed. In general terms it would seem extravagant to pay three, four or even five thousand pounds for the initial installation of a laboratory, and then go on paying hundreds or even thousands more pounds for the upkeep and service of, and provision of material for a language laboratory, if all that it will do is provide a place where language students can get some private study done. If the work done must be oral, then the provision of cubicles and suitably modified tape-recorders would fill the bill, and the provision of course-material for the students to "study" would hardly be expensive, since few courses have yet been published which are designed primarily for this purpose. On the other hand, to take a positive, constructive approach, if a school or college is going to invest in what for the arts or liberal studies side of the house would be a colossal sum for an elaborate installation comprising more than one laboratory, recording facilities, audio-visual classroom equipment, and the services of a technician, then those entrusted with the task of teaching with the aid of such equipment are presented with a golden opportunity of investigating the possibilities of streamlining the teaching processes, making them more thorough in respect of every student in every group, and so of revolutionising the whole process of foreign language study. But the question remains; what about the relationship the teacher builds up with his students in the classroom? What happens to it in the laboratory?

Assuming that the language laboratory is going to be used as a place where teaching is carried out, where new material is introduced to the student for the first time, and where exercises may be carried out on that material before the student ever sees it in writing, or works with it in a classroom, then the role of the monitor is an important one, since all the work carried out in the laboratory session is under his direct control, and the arrangement and timing of it are his responsibility. And here is where the questions start to be asked.

Casual Eavesdropping

First, is the one facility at present provided in most installations — that whereby one is able to listen in to any booth without (in theory) disturbing the student — sufficient? As far as monitoring students in the sense of impersonally "controlling" their work by making a spot check at intervals is concerned, it may seem to be so on first consideration. But a second

question immediately springs to mind. What do you actually achieve by casually overhearing a minute or two of the activity in the booth of any one student? You are reassured that he is still there, and still alive (if the arrangement of the lab. is such that you can't actually see him), but do you actually *do* any good? And is it of any real value to know that he is dutifully repeating, say, the fourth sentence of the text in the space provided in what you can only assume is the best accent he can muster? Surely you knew he was going to be doing that — or something very like it — before you tuned in? So why did you bother? Would it perhaps have helped if you had been able in some way to know what you are going to hear before you heard it? And would it have been helpful if you could have known what he had been doing for the previous ten or fifteen minutes, and at what rate he had been doing it in comparison with the rest of the group, and in comparison with the rate you expected of him when you decided to do this particular piece of work? The fact is you hardly know anything about what he has been doing in his booth since the first moment he sat in it. Some lab. equipment provides no means of knowing whether the student is making a recording, or just listening. If such equipment is used in a laboratory laid out in such a way that the monitor can't see the student, then what do you do when you tune in to a booth and find yourself in the middle of an oppressive silence? It could be, to take a particular possibility, that the student has been listening to his version, having switched off his microphone in order not to be disturbed by his own laboured breathing, and having reached what was for him a difficult passage, and having finally solved the particular problem which had been bothering him, has stopped the tape while he says aloud into his dead microphone the word or phrase which had previously been eluding him. It may be for him the most important moment of the session, the final triumph over adversity, the ultimate realisation of the teacher's aim. But not only does the monitor completely miss it, he also stands a very good chance of ruining it, by pressing his "stop and talk" at the crucial moment, and bursting in upon the student's startled consciousness to ask him *what is wrong*. Such misfortunes may with the best intentions in the world turn monitoring into mere interfering of the most unproductive sort, and make nonsense of any attempt on the part of the teacher to assist the student.

Limitations of Console

If we accept, then, that the monitoring process when carried out in this "hit or miss" way is inadequate, the next question must be: can monitoring really be any use anyway? Since at the present time most lab. consoles are no better equipped than the one described above, or at best have only one pilot light to show that the student is recording, the answer so far as casual monitoring is concerned must regretfully be in the negative, since even the most conscientious monitor can do little good and an impulsive one can actually do harm. On the other hand, does monitoring have to be casual? Most monitors no doubt consider themselves to be systematic, working steadily round the lab. and tuning in at regular intervals to all students, or else concentrating on a limited number during a session, giving each one the benefit of a lot of listening, interrupting him frequently to "put him right", and giving him "help" which he didn't ask for and probably wouldn't thank him for. What good does this do? He could have achieved as much, if not more, in the classroom, so far as attending to the real needs of the student is concerned, and the much-advertised freedom of the student to work at his own speed is being impaired to the point where he is actually being inhibited in precisely the way that the laboratory is supposed to avoid. Systematic though these methods may appear to be, they are still casual or haphazard in as much as the monitor does not know what he will hear before he hears it. Nor does he know how many times the student has practised that particular phrase, nor even necessarily if the student is saying it at that moment, or listening to a recording he made minutes previously. But, to reiterate, does monitoring really have to be so casual? Perhaps if the monitor could follow the progress of some or all of his students (depending on the size of the group) from the moment the initial tapecast ended through all the early halting attempts to master the comprehension and pronunciation of new words, to

the point where whole phrases, whole sentences even, were reeled off in response to the master recording, then the monitor might be able to assess the true performance of his students, notice and note down their difficulties (even perhaps deducing the root cause) and put all the knowledge he would gain by this process to use in a subsequent classroom session, and, most important of all, in the planning and presentation of future work. For, if as much as half the student's time is to be spent in the laboratory, the teacher has got to know with absolute certainty if the work he is setting the students is right in both type and quantity. And that means knowing what everyone did during a lab. session, knowing how many failed to complete the task, how many got through with time to waste, and how many were as much in the dark at the end as they had been at the beginning.

The organization-machine of conventional teaching has as its governor the written work which is set and marked at regular intervals. Current language laboratory teaching with its casual monitoring process has no such governor, unless each student's tape is listened to by the teacher from beginning to end after each session, an unthinkable task, if only from the point of view of the time involved, though one which must be carried out if the teacher is ever going to be able really to know his course-material. And the difficulties arising here are not only ones of finding the time and opportunity for this aural marking. Prodigious feats of management would be required to ensure that every student completed a final "fair copy" tape at precisely the moment the session was due to end. And who could say that that was necessarily his best version anyway? And if it weren't, would anyone believe him when he claimed to have recorded a far better version earlier on, but to have accidentally erased it?

The alternative to marking students' lab. work *after* the lab. session is clearly to mark it *during* the session, not by hazardous spot-checking, but by continuously watching the progress of the group throughout the time they are in the lab. For this the ideal group size should be between six and ten students. Larger groups could be subdivided, though division into fractions smaller than halves would seriously jeopardise the success of the operation. With adequate controls for the purpose the monitor could observe group progress, individual progress, and perhaps most vital of all, determine precisely the right moment for moving from one phase of the work in hand to another, in the case of individual students, groups, or the class as a whole. Finally, to allow complete freedom of movement, the lab. should be provided with "individual record" facilities, without which it is impossible for the class to be sectionalized to receive fresh work. Never was the saying about "spoiling a ship for a ha'porth of tar" more tellingly applied than to an inadequately equipped language laboratory.

The Ideal Console

What facilities, then, should the ideal console possess? For complete monitoring three pilot lights and a counter should be provided for each booth. One pilot should correspond with the "record' position, one with the "play" position, and one with the "rewind" mode. The monitor would then know at a glance the nature of the activity of the student, and if no light were shining, he would know that for some reason or other the student had stopped his machine. A counting device, controlled by impulses on the student tape transferred from the master tape at the initial broadcast of the lesson material, would show at any moment precisely which point the student had reached in his work, and would do away with the irritating and uncannily frequent tendency to monitor students always when they are repeating one particular line or answering one particular question. In short what this equipment would provide for is *planned monitoring*. It would make possible visual as well as audial monitoring, and would make it possible for a group of students to be visually monitored simultaneously, so that the overall progress of a group could be checked, the relative progress of students within the group could be observed, and wastage of time and attention could be minimised, since the monitor could decide in advance exactly what he wanted to listen to, and proceed to listen to it, noting his observations as he went along.

For it should not only be the student who

benefit from monitoring during laboratory work. The teacher has a great deal to learn about the work he is giving his students to do. Even the best and oldest of audio-visual or audio-lingual courses has still had very little use, and no teacher is yet in any kind of position to affirm categorically that a particular course is good or bad, or that any one method or approach is any better than any other. Nor will he ever be, unless he can examine more systematically the work processes of the laboratory.

Student-Teacher Relationship

And so back to the question of the student-teacher relationship. Nothing could be better calculated to destroy any such relationship than the kind of casual monitoring currently employed in language labs. The teacher who knows little or nothing of what his students are doing for as much as half the time they are under his charge cannot hope to retain in the lab. the sort of trust and confidence that are built up in the classroom, and inevitably the classroom periods are adversely affected by the breakdown of this confidence which the move to the lab. entails Certain factors are important if the relationship is not to be broken. Briefly, student and teacher should be in visual contact in the lab., "cockpit drill" (however simple) should be rigidly adhered to, and live broadcasts of material should be as common as tapecasts, so that the teacher remains squarely in the driving-seat all the time, and the class are aware that the teacher is ready to "ad lib" if their performance requires it. It is often said that students in the lab. cease to be conscious of the monitor, especially if he cuts the number of times he interrupts his students to the minimum. After all, the teacher's greatest aim in the lab. is to get his students to concentrate, secure in the knowledge that they have free will within a pre-ordained course-pattern. Such concentration can easily be achieved, and a sense of continuity of work through lab. and classroom sessions can be built up in the minds of students, if the teacher regards his work in the lab. as the head of the coin of his work overall, and the classroom work as the tail.

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